

# BOARD AND DIRECTOR ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES

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## FOR GOVERNING BOARDS - THE SOMETIMES SUBTLE DIFFERENCES BETWEEN POLICY AND OPERATIONS

**Contributed By: Lethene Parks, Trustee  
Stevens County Rural Library District**

If there is a mantra for governing boards of library trustees it is: “The board sets policy, the director operates the library with the assistance of staff.” What does this really mean, and what are the differences? Because I have worn the hats of both a librarian and a trustee, I was asked to offer some thoughts on this topic.

Sometimes the line between policy and operation is very thin and the differences are subtle. Basically, the board of trustees and the library director must work as a team, just as the director must construct a team with staff. In order to work successfully, it must be a process of two-way communication, consultation and trust building.

### **Building a Board, Director, and Staff Team**

In addition to regular board meetings, an annual planning retreat with the director and selected staff is an opportunity to build communications and plan for the library future. Although the library vision and mission statements do not change very often, they should be reviewed along with the library strategic or long-range plan and annual plans. A retreat offers the time to discuss in depth, and to clarify directions, goals and strategies for the coming year. These meetings are, by law, open public meetings that the public may attend so opportunities for citizen input can be incorporated into the retreat agenda. Indeed, ongoing ways should be found to obtain input from residents of the library community.

The board should meet following the retreat and include on its agenda a discussion of appropriate policies and plans for the library.

### **Community Involvement**

If the trustees and director are to fulfill their responsibilities, both must be active in the community. Both must know the community to develop those policies and practices that bring the best possible library service their community.

Any five- or seven-person library board is likely to represent a variety of community connections. These connections can provide avenues to knowing and understanding the community and to advocacy for the library.

Trustees have a responsibility to stay informed—to regularly attend board meetings and to read and understand information presented to them about the library and its operation. They also have a responsibility to actively listen to community residents. It is equally important that they advocate for the library with community residents and with local, state, and federal governmental representatives. In order to do this, trustees will need to answer questions and to explain library policies and practices. They need to work as a team with the library director, because some questions, especially about library practice, are best directed to the library director. The director and staff must also be prepared to explain library policies and actively advocate for the library.

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## Developing Policies

There are several levels of decision-making involved in policy-making. There are many times when the board will ask the library director to analyze impacts before it establishes a policy, and there will be times when the director will consult the board before proceeding with a specific course of action.

Often the director will call the board's attention to need for policy in a specific area and may draft language for the board to consider. In other instances the board may identify need for a policy and will either ask the director to draft language for board discussion and action or they may jointly develop specific language.

Sometimes the director will make decisions related to library operations and will simply inform the board of her or his actions, or perhaps ask for their concurrence for a proposed course of action. This latter course of action is probably wise in situations where it is not initially clear whether additional policy decisions will need to be made or where the distinction between practice and policy is not entirely clear. Discussion can usually clarify the issues and decisions can be made, often by consensus. Certain kinds of decisions may be delegated to the director.

## Examples of Director and Board Roles and Responsibilities

Let me elaborate on the respective roles and responsibilities of trustees and director with several examples. Especially in large libraries, some of the tasks or decisions that I've identified as the director's will likely be delegated to managerial or supervisory library staff.

### Mission/Roles of the Library in the Community

It is the governing board's responsibility to determine the mission and roles of the library after a planning process that includes a great deal of input from residents of the community, and in coordination with the library director. These fundamental decisions need to be articulated in a mission statement and supported by policy and planning.

Once those fundamental decisions are made, it is the board's responsibility to hire a director who is in agreement with and can support the chosen roles. In the case of the newly formed Stevens County Rural Library District, the roles were actually established before the director was hired and the board needed to assure that the new director supported the roles.

A more specific example of how this works: Board policy or the library mission states that the library is to be user friendly and a place where people feel welcome. It is the library director's responsibility to make it happen. It will involve setting expectations regarding attitudes of staff towards the library customers, training for staff, and establishing library practices and procedures that make users feel welcome and satisfy their needs. These are all responsibilities of the director.

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### Budgets, Contracts, and Grants

The board approves the library budget, as drawn up and recommended by the director, but it is based on goals set by the board. The budget corresponds to the annual work plan for the director and staff. The board may suggest general policy directions for the budget, but the director in consultation with staff decides what is possible within budget constraints, and how best to meet the entire gamut of needs.

The director expends money within approved budget parameters and keeps the board informed. While trustees may review and approve vouchers each month, they should not approve individual expenditures. The board should be informed by the director of any major changes needed in the budget and the proposed changes must have board concurrence. Trustees should not be involved in adjustments made to budgets as long as those adjustments are within general budget parameters as approved by the board.

A contract or grant must also correspond to the goals of the library. The board must approve all contracts with contracting cities, consultants, and the like but the contract or grant specifics will be drawn up and recommended by the director. Trustees must certainly be kept informed of potential contracts or grants, and should provide input regarding the content or parameters of impending contracts or grant documents. Whether to apply for a particular grant or enter into a contract with a specific entity may be a policy matter, and thus the board will make the final decision. There may be instances where the board determines that it is appropriate to delegate to the director the responsibility for signing agreements on behalf of the library.

### Buildings and Property

The board, in consultation with the director, may determine in policy whether to own buildings or rent space, whether to buy land for buildings, the general locations of new buildings, etc. On the other hand, the board may also establish a broad goal that will guide the director and staff in making these decisions. This broad approval usually happens when there are multiple decisions to be made as a result of a substantial bond issue. The governing board may also set policies such as whether to allocate a certain percentage of a building's cost for art works.

The director makes recommendations on these matters and implements the decisions. The director decides, without further board action, on specifics such as color scheme and décor, furniture, computer system requirements and design of the building. The director will keep the board informed and trustees may offer opinions, but these are operational decisions that should be made by the director.

### Personnel

The board establishes overall personnel policies such as guidelines for salary and benefits, hiring practices, and other personnel actions unless the library is part of a city and must follow municipal policy. The director implements personnel policies. Trustees should not become involved unless personnel policy changes are called for.

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Unless the library is part of a municipal system that maintains authority to hire the director, the board hires the library director and sets salary and benefits. In this process, the board may seek input from library staff and/or community residents, but the ultimate decision rests with the board. In turn, the director hires library staff and the board is not involved in interviewing or selection.

Unless the salary schedule is established by the city, the board approves the salary schedule as drawn up and recommended by the director. It is the director's responsibility to decide where a job classification will be placed on that salary schedule. If library staff belong to a labor union, the library trustees should not take an active part in labor negotiations. The board might, however, approve the hiring of a consultant to assist the director by carrying out negotiations. When an agreement is reached and recommended by the director, the board will approve the labor contract.

The board does an annual performance review for the library director. As a result of the review the board and director should jointly set goals and expectations for the coming year. The annual performance review of the director will be based on how well those goals and expectations have been achieved. The director will carry out annual performance reviews of library staff, set goals for staff performance, and determine staff training needs. The board approves policies for staff training, attendance at conferences, workshops or classes, travel reimbursement and the like, but they are not involved in staff review.

Staff development policy statements will likely be drawn up by the director, based on staff needs and available budget, and recommended to the board. Such "working policies" are really largely procedural and, as such, the responsibility of the director. If underlying policy statements are needed, the director informs the board of the need and recommends content or draws up language for board consideration.

Disciplinary actions related to library staff are a responsibility of the library director. Although the board sets disciplinary policy as part of overall personnel policy, unless it is mandated by their city government, board members should not become involved in specific disciplinary actions. Complaints made directly to board members must be referred back to the director for action. The director should always consult the library attorney on any disciplinary actions that may reach the point of hearings before a human rights commission or a lawsuit. Trustees must certainly be kept informed and will probably need to approve expenditures for attorney fees.

Disciplinary action or firing of a library director is, of course, a governing board responsibility.

#### Collections, Hours, and Services

These are "working policies" or operational procedures and largely the responsibility of the library director. The board of trustees sets the goals in its adopted plan and defines strategies for collections, access and services, but it is up to the library director and staff to implement the actions that meet the goals.

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Although a board member may have a special interest in a particular collection, or personally see a need for certain services, a board member must make it very clear that their personal suggestions are not endorsed by the authority of the board. The director and staff must always remain free to consider board member suggestions, just as they would any citizen suggestions, but staff are ultimately responsible for judging how best to develop the collection and library services.

The board may adopt a goal that addresses the issue of access to the library, thereby setting an expectation for the number of hours open or other services. The director, however, must decide how many and what hours are feasible within the budget, and balance available staff resources with the expertise needed by the facility. The director should keep the board informed of what has been put into practice. A similar process will govern decision about services such as story times for children, computers for public access, outreach services to nursing or retirement homes, and others.

#### Community Relations and Publicity

The library board might establish a goal stating that the library will support and encourage partnerships and cooperative ventures with community organizations whenever feasible. The director is then clearly enabled to create working agreements with such organizations. However, this is an example of a situation where the director may appropriately decide that such relationships are good library practice and simply proceed to implement cooperative actions while keeping the board informed. An example might be that the library agrees to house the materials of a local genealogical or historical society. This action may, or may not, require a formal agreement that the board should approve.

The board might establish a goal that says the library will use all means possible to keep residents of the community informed about the library, its services, and activities. The details of how this is to be done and by whom are for the director to decide. However, it is wise for the trustees and director to work together and decide which activities are appropriate for board members to undertake and which are director or staff functions. The words of wisdom are “Just be sure everyone is delivering the same message.”

#### **Conclusion**

The director must do her or his best to carry out the governing board goals and policy directions. It is imperative that the board backs the director's decisions. It is not always crystal clear where policy stops and practice starts. However, we are all in this library business together. People become librarians because they believe in the value of libraries to communities. People become library trustees for the very same reason. By clarifying our respective roles and responsibilities, by building trust and good communication, and by working together as a team, we can all be more effective in bringing the best possible library service to the people of our communities.

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## GOVERNING AND ADVISORY LIBRARY BOARD RELATIONSHIPS

**Contributed by:** Anne E. Haley, Director  
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<b>Quiz:</b>	<b>All libraries have a library board</b>	<b>Yes</b>	<b>No</b>
	<b>All library boards are the same</b>	<b>Yes</b>	<b>No</b>

Library boards exist in political environments, regardless if they are advisory or governing. Relationships between library boards and their appointing authorities can be collegial or fractious, depending upon the issues at hand. A board's effectiveness is influenced by its breadth of representation from key community constituents among its members and its active involvement in community life. In all library settings, success is influenced by a clear understanding of and commitment to the library's mission and an appreciation for the political dynamics.

### Contracting or Annexed Cities and Towns

Library boards in cities and towns that contract for library services or are annexed to a rural or intercounty library district are advisory. They are a special interest standing committee whose mission is to advocate for the library for such purposes as building improvements in cities where library services are in city owned facilities. They may also be an advisory committee to the rural or intercounty library district whose role is to provide library personnel, programs, services, materials and various policies for their use in the city or town.

### City or Town Libraries

Library boards in cities that support an independent public library may be advisory to the city or may be responsible for the management of the library. In cities that elected to be an Optional Municipal Code city to broaden the city's power of self-government, the library board is advisory. The public library is considered a department of the city. The breadth of responsibilities of the advisory board may vary according to local tradition and expectation. For instance, policies affecting the public's use of the library—meeting rooms, circulation, collection development, unattended children, rules of conduct—may be delegated to the library board for adoption or may be enacted by the city council as ordinances. In cities that are not an Optional Municipal Code city, the library board is responsible for the management and control of the library. These responsibilities include employing library staff, controlling finances and setting policies for the governance of the library, but they exist within the context of a city.

### Library Districts and Regional Libraries

Library boards for rural county, intercounty, island, partial-county library districts and regional libraries are the governing bodies for these municipal corporations. Their responsibilities include levying tax, entering into contracts, employing staff, controlling finances, leasing and purchasing real estate, and setting policies for the governance of the library. Even though county commissioners and/or city councils appoint them, they are not advisory to them. Their responsibility is foremost for the operations and integrity of their library.

## A COMPARISON: ROLES OF A LIBRARY BOARD AND THE LIBRARY DIRECTOR

As Lethene Parks noted in her introduction “If there is a mantra for library trustees it is: The board sets policy, the director operates the library with the assistance of staff.” The following chart provides some examples of the major roles and responsibilities of trustees and of the library director and staff. For some clarification of advisory board responsibilities particularly in Optional Municipal Code cities, refer to Chapter 3, Legal Structure.

Activity	Governing Board Roles and Advisory Board Roles	Library Director Responsibilities in Cities and Districts
<b><i>Employing library personnel</i></b>	<p>Employ, supervise and annually evaluate library director. Contract or make other employment agreements with library director. Take corrective action, may fire director.</p> <p>Approve union contracts. No role in hiring/firing staff. Refer staff grievances to library director.</p> <p><u>Advisory Boards:</u> Depending on city, the board’s role may be to provide recommendations and advice in hiring, evaluating, firing director.</p>	<p>Employ library personnel, supervise, and annually evaluate. Take corrective action and/or terminate staff employment in accordance with personnel policies and/or union contract.</p> <p>Provide for union negotiations.</p> <p>Investigate and resolve staff grievances.</p> <p><u>Municipal Library Directors</u> Implement city personnel policies and procedures.</p>
<b><i>Mission statement</i></b>	<p>Adopt mission statement.</p> <p>Employ mission as basis for setting priorities and plans.</p> <p>Interpret mission to community and to community officials.</p>	<p>Act as technical advisor to board, coordinating as needed, make recommendations for board consideration.</p> <p>Interpret mission to library staff, the community and governmental authorities.</p>
<b><i>Strategic and long term planning</i></b>	<p>Evaluate community needs as basis for planning.</p> <p>Adopt plans establishing goals and priorities for future directions. Examine and incorporate Washington’s Statewide Plan <i>Designing Our Future</i> or similar planning documents that address statewide library planning.</p> <p>Communicate plan to community and community officials.</p> <p><u>Advisory Boards:</u> Depending on the city, roles may range from adopting plan to recommending to mayor and city council for official approval.</p>	<p>Act as coordinator, technical advisor to board and planning groups. Provide information, make recommendations for board consideration, report progress.</p> <p>Communicate and interpret plans, goals and priorities to library staff and community.</p> <p><u>Municipal Library Directors</u> Present and support adoption of plans to municipal authorities.</p>

Activity	Governing Board Roles and Advisory Board Roles	Library Director Responsibilities in Cities and Districts
<b><i>Annual work plan</i></b>	Monitor progress.	Implement work plan, report progress to board and in cities, to municipal authorities
<b><i>Daily operations</i></b>	No role.	Responsible for all operational management decisions, including staff deployment and assignments.
<b><i>Board meetings</i></b>	<p>Adhere to open public meeting legal requirements as well as board bylaws and code of ethics.</p> <p>Establish library policy and directions that are substantiated in board minutes.</p> <p><u>Advisory Boards:</u> Depending on the city, may recommend library policy and directions.</p>	<p>Attend all board meetings as the technical advisor or secretary to board, recommend policies, provide research and information for planning purposes.</p> <p>Establish operational procedures to implement approved policies.</p> <p><u>Municipal Library Directors:</u> Attend city council meetings as library department head</p>
<b><i>Budget and fiscal management</i></b>	<p>Evaluate and approve budget that supports mission, goals and priorities.</p> <p>Hold public budget hearings and legally certify or file budgets as required by law.</p> <p>Regularly monitor revenue and expenditure fiscal reports.</p> <p>Work to secure adequate library funding, approve grants or other projects, approve participation in cooperative library projects.</p> <p><u>Advisory Boards:</u> Depending on city, recommend adequate budget, work to secure adequate funding. Recommend approval of projects, proposals.</p>	<p>Identify and evaluate financial needs of library. Develop and present proposed budget that supports library goals and priorities.</p> <p>Administer approved budget. Provide fiscal reports to all board meetings.</p> <p>Work to secure adequate funding, prepare proposals to funding sources or to participate in cooperative projects, implement as approved.</p> <p><u>Municipal Library Directors:</u> Follows municipal budget directions and procedures. Provides analysis to authorities concerning budget, follows city procedures for proposals, contracts, etc.</p>
<b><i>Adopt library policies</i></b>	<p>Adopt and regularly review policies such as:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Personnel</li> <li>Continuing education</li> <li>Fiscal</li> <li>Collection development</li> <li>Customer services</li> <li>Intellectual freedom</li> <li>Public information</li> <li>Equipment use &amp; purchase/Facilities</li> </ul> <p><u>Advisory Boards:</u> Depending on city, may propose or adopt library related policies such as intellectual freedom, collection development.</p>	<p>Recommend new or revised policies, research and provide information about potential policies and implications.</p> <p>Present proposed language of policies for consideration.</p> <p><u>Municipal Library Directors:</u> Implement city policies and procedures.</p> <p>Depending on city, may directly implement library related policies, or may present to mayor and council for approval.</p>



<b>Activity</b>	<b>Governing Board Roles and Advisory Board Roles</b>	<b>Library Director Responsibilities in Cities and Districts</b>
<b><i>Participate in professional organizations and continuing education</i></b>	<p>Affiliate with state, regional and national library organizations. Actively participate in conferences, task forces, etc. as possible.</p> <p>Maintain a board education program.</p> <p>Attend continuing education opportunities in state, region and/or nation.</p> <p>Regularly read library publications as well as resources for nonprofit organizations and governmental bodies.</p>	<p>Affiliate with state, regional and national library organizations. Actively participate in conferences, task forces, etc. as possible.</p> <p>Coordinate or otherwise provide opportunities for board continuing education as requested</p> <p>Attend continuing education opportunities in state, region and/or nation.</p> <p>Regularly read library publications as well as resources for nonprofit organizations and governmental bodies.</p>
<b><i>Library services</i></b>	<p>Adopt policies that assure services are extended to the entire community, including individuals or groups that may be reluctant or unable to use "standard" services.</p> <p>Support the cultural and educational role of the library encouraging individual, life-long learning.</p> <p>Encourage extension of library capabilities by building alliances with organizations that have similar educational and cultural goals.</p>	<p>Implement and evaluate services that extend a variety of services and materials that meet individual and community information needs.</p> <p>Seek out and coordinate with other libraries and services that enhance community library services. For example, the Washington Talking Book and Braille Library, literacy groups, etc</p>
<b><i>Collection development</i></b>	<p>Adopt policy statements that reflect needs of entire community including support for freedom to read.</p> <p>Establish materials budget that supports library goals.</p>	<p>Regularly evaluate how effectively collection meets community needs.</p> <p>Provide for selecting and purchasing materials.</p> <p>Inform community of collection development goals, special collections.</p>
<b><i>Marketing library services</i></b>	<p>Assure that library has plan for marketing library.</p>	<p>Develop, implement, and evaluate marketing plan. Report results to board.</p>
<b><i>Library advocacy, coordinating with other governmental units</i></b>	<p>Advocate for the library in the community, attend meetings and hearings, seek out allies.</p> <p>Address regional or statewide library issues by communicating with elected officials, and participating in activities that support all libraries such as the annual library legislative day.</p>	<p>Advocate for the library in the local community, attend meetings and hearings, seek out allies.</p> <p>Address regional or statewide library issues by communicating with elected officials, and participating in activities that support all libraries such as the annual library legislative day.</p>

Activity	Governing Board Roles and Advisory Board Roles	Library Director Responsibilities in Cities and Districts
<b><i>Library buildings &amp; equipment</i></b>	<p>Approve expenditures for facilities contracts, for construction or renovation. Approve major equipment contracts. Approve contracts with architects, consultants, others.</p> <p>Provide information to community regarding facts of project funding. Follow Public Disclosure Commission (PDC) rules for bond issues or other campaigns.</p> <p><u>Advisory Boards:</u> Depending on city, may recommend projects, provide information to architects and others, communicate facts to public. Follows Public Disclosure Commission rules.</p>	<p>Research feasibility of projects, gather information about potential architects, contractors, other resources for board consideration.</p> <p>Implement building plans, purchase and install equipment. Coordinate with architects, other experts. Provide funding and other information to community, following PDC rules.</p> <p>Provide for ongoing maintenance.</p> <p><u>Municipal Library Directors:</u> Work with city staff and within city regulations for planning, designing, purchasing, constructing, renovating, maintaining, etc.</p>
<b><i>Build community support</i></b>	<p>Encourage and support Friends of the Library group(s) and volunteer programs that enhance the library capabilities.</p> <p>Adopt a plan to represent the library to the community through meetings, written materials, etc.</p>	<p>Coordinate with Friends of the Library group(s) providing suggestions for projects and library priorities which Friends may support.</p> <p>Develop volunteer position descriptions and recruit as appropriate.</p>

(Adapted from *Washington Public Library Trustee Handbook 1989*, the *Connecticut Public Library Trustees Handbook 1993*, and *Florida Public Library Board Manual 1988*.)